

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT LEARNING SERIES

# Family Engagement to Support Student Mental Health and Well-Being

Welcome to the Family Engagement Learning Series briefs! These briefs summarize a six-part webinar series of conversations designed to Raise the Bar for family engagement practices between school and home. The 2023 series produced by the U.S. Department of Education in partnership with Carnegie Corporation of New York and Overdeck Family Foundation, provided an overview of evidence, highlighted bright spots in the field, and shared resources and evidence-based strategies to support student success with education leaders and practitioners.

## Introduction

“[Raise the Bar: Lead the World](#)” is the U.S. Department of Education’s call to action to transform public education and unite around what truly works — based on decades of experience and research — to advance education equity and excellence. Achieving academic excellence for all students by supporting the conditions to accelerate learning and offering a [comprehensive and rigorous education](#), as well as creating pathways to global engagement by providing every student a pathway to multilingualism, are key focus areas under Raise the Bar. Boldly improving learning conditions is another key focus area that aligns directly with this webinar’s content, with a focus on investing in [student mental health and well-being](#) and the [teaching profession](#). This webinar focused on assisting states and districts in achieving the goals of supporting student mental health and well-being for every student.

Youth, parents, and educators have elevated mental health as a top priority. This webinar focused on evidence-based and actionable strategies to support student well-being both in- and out-of-school, prioritizing mental health from the early grades through college, and the effects of social media on young people’s emotional well-being.



School communities are seeking better strategies and deeper support to promote student (and adult) well-being. Stress can impact the learning structures of the brain. However, when families and educators work together to surround kids in trusting and supportive relationships and adopt an asset-based perspective and whole-child approach, adults can help youth move from illness to wellness and promote their learning and development. Thus, the U.S. Department of Education is committed to [Raising the Bar for Parent Partnership in Our Schools](#).



## Evidence: Family Engagement to Support Student Mental Health and Well-Being

The fourth webinar in the series, [Family Engagement to Support Student Mental Health and Well-Being](#), was moderated by [Saskia Levy Thompson](#), Carnegie Corporation's program director in the Education program, with evidence from the field presented by [Dr. Pamela Cantor](#).



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the webinar

The evidence from the field highlighted the following:

- Across the nation, schools have insufficient professional staff to support mental health services to students, inadequate funding to support services, and lack of community providers to support youth mental health services.
- Schools are the gateway to needed services for many young people.
- Federal leaders from the U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as the Surgeon General are providing funding and guidance to support [student mental health](#), including:
  - › U.S. Department of Education investment in increasing the capacity of professionals currently in schools, [increasing the supply of mental health professionals](#), and increasing funding through the Medicaid program to support school health services, including mental health services.
  - › The [Bipartisan Safer Communities Act](#), which directs \$500 million to increase the capacity and supply of mental health professionals in schools and \$1 billion to state departments of education for Stronger Connections to support schools.
- Stress is one of the most important drivers of the youth mental health crisis and tied to student focus and engagement, attendance, and behavior in school. Small amounts of stress (through the hormone cortisol) can help us be more alert and adaptive for a test or performance. Large amounts and continuous stress can damage the brain's learning structures, especially when those structures are still developing.
- The human brain is malleable, and brain development is impacted by environment,



experiences, and relationships.

- Human connection (which triggers the hormone oxytocin) is the brain's primary energy source, making relationships and trust critical in helping reverse the effects and feelings associated with trauma. Adults should avoid deficit frameworks and adopt an asset-based perspective that values kids as whole people.
- We need to create learning environments and systems that recognize kids as whole people. Components of supporting the whole child include:
  - › Positive developmental relationships.
  - › Environments that make children feel safe and as if they belong.
  - › Rich, meaningful, relevant learning experiences, to help students discover their infinite capabilities.
  - › Intentional development of skills, habits, and mindsets.
  - › Integrated supports by partnering with families.



**Today's crisis is not only about learning or only about mental health. It's both. ... Our job today is to put momentum back in that system and into all of the settings where kids are learning and growing.**

**- DR. PAMELA CANTOR**

## Learnings from Bright Spots

Diverse environmental factors determine how a kid shows up to school. Listening to youth, establishing peer support systems, destigmatizing mental health challenges, and creating safe spaces are just some of the ways that families and educators can promote student well-being. This webinar featured nonprofits, medical professionals, researchers, and state and federal leaders, including:



- [Katy Neas](#), Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, U.S. Department of Education;
- [Dr. Pamela Cantor](#), Turnaround for Children;
- [Eisha Buch](#), Common Sense Media;
- [Dr. Emily Weinstein](#), Project Zero- Harvard Graduate School of Education;
- [Dr. Jenn Charlot](#), Transcend Education;
- [Cynthia Robinson-Rivers](#), Van Ness Elementary School (D.C.);
- [Gary Linnen](#), PeerForward; and
- Maftuna Khaydarova, PeerForward (student leader).

## Key Takeaways and Strategies

- **Student connections & support**
  - › Educators and parents should build trusting relationships, seeking to understand what kids are going through and recognizing the generational differences in how we think and talk about mental health.
  - › Promote peer-to-peer connections for students who may not feel comfortable turning to their parents or educators for support and who need to know that they are not alone.
  - › Parents and educators need mental health resources to equip students with the skills and habits to self-regulate and manage difficult emotions or experiences.
  - › Adults should leverage the expertise and lived experiences of youth when developing mental health supports.



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**Relationships and trust are the antidote to stress. And this is why relationships are essential to all development and learning.**

**-DR. PAMELA CANTOR**

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- **Improving the learning environment**
  - › Develop curriculum and materials that discuss mental health for educators, families, and peers.
  - › Implement proactive and responsive strategies to support student mental health and well-being.
  - › Design classroom time and space to serve the whole child. Help them feel seen, valued, and cared for.
  - › Utilize technology for its potential to advance learning and connection while mitigating the harm to mental health and well-being.
  - › Encourage digital literacy and self-reflection in students regarding their tech and media use.
  - › Take advantage of the digital tools and skills that emerged from the pandemic to make connections between families and educators more accessible.
- **Improving school culture**
  - › Ensure that students and their families are reflected in their school, from physical spaces to staff.
  - › Support the well-being of the adults who are responsible for caring for our youth and build their capacity to manage their own stress and emotions (i.e., resources, professional development).
  - › Offer resources to busy families and educators that are easy to use and understand.
  - › Invest in parent coordinators as a key communication link between the parent community and the school.
  - › Provide opportunities for families and students to collectively address the issues that they are worried about.



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**At the end of the day, you know, it's about community. You know, when you think about any systemic challenge, the answer is always gonna be community. So families have to play a pivotal role. ... And again, back to the stigmatism around mental health, generationally, we just think about it differently and our young adults right now are much more inclined to be very open about it.**

**- GARY Z. LINNEN**

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- Parents, families, and educators are among the most trusted adults for young people. Here are a few things they should and should not do to support students:

- › Adults should not:
  - Catastrophize kids since they will believe what the adults around them believe.
  - Blame kids since they are not at fault if they are stressed or have fallen behind.
- › Adults should:
  - Connect deeply with kids.
  - Construct experiences with purpose and relevance.
  - Notice and celebrate accomplishments.
  - Collaborate with others (parents, coaches, counselors, teachers, etc.).
  - Reduce isolation.
  - Reconnect kids with their purpose.



We know that if students come to school fearing for their basic physical safety, their brain stems are in control. They're focused on fight, flee, or surrender instead of learning. We first have to help them regulate through activities like breathing exercises. ... Where we want students to be is in their reasoning state where their prefrontal cortex is in charge, they're ready to learn.

- CYNTHIA ROBINSON-RIVERS

## RESOURCES

- Family Engagement Learning Series [summary and videos](#)
- U.S. Department of Education's [website](#)
  - › [Resources for parents and educators](#)
  - › [Raise the Bar priorities](#)
- [Overdeck Family Foundation](#)
  - › 2022 Grantmaking & Impact [Report](#)
- [Carnegie Corporation of New York](#)
- Department of Education's [Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services](#)
  - › Follow OSERS on X (formerly known as Twitter) @ [ED\\_Sped\\_Rehab](#)
  - › [Assistance to States for the Education of Children with Disabilities](#)
- Resources and organizations shared by Dr. Pamela Cantor:
  - › [Design Principles](#)
  - › [Turnaround for Children](#)
  - › Dr. Pamela Cantor [website](#)
  - › [Podcast on youth mental health](#)
  - › [Psychology Today blogs](#)
  - › [National PTA podcast](#)
  - › [The 180 Podcast with Renee Prince](#)
- [Fact Sheet: Biden-Harris Administration Announces New Actions to Tackle Nation's Mental Health Crisis](#)
- [Social Media and Youth Mental Health - Current Priorities of the U.S. Surgeon General \(hhs.gov\)](#)
- [PeerForward](#) social channels:
  - › [PeerForward IG](#)
  - › [PeerForward Facebook](#)
  - › [PeerForward X \(formerly known as Twitter\)](#)
  - › [PeerForward YouTube](#)
  - › [PeerForward LinkedIn](#)
- [Common Sense Media](#) shared several resources:
  - › [Digital Citizenship Curriculum](#)
  - › [Family Engagement Toolkit](#)
  - › [Digital Citizenship Implementation Guide](#)
  - › ["Behind Their Screens"](#) book
- [Transcend Education](#) shared several resources:
  - › [Whole Child Focus](#)
  - › [ed post op-ed on mental health](#)
  - › [Whole Child Model website](#)
  - › [Whole Child Model video](#)
- RevX [website](#)



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